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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000715

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SUBJECT: CAIRO CONSULAR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INITIATIVE

¶11. Summary. The Consular Section is aiming to make a more positive impression on the 40,000 Egyptians who come to its windows every year by considering them a target audience for public diplomacy efforts. This is in line with post's Peace objective and with the Department's objective to promote greater understanding with the Muslim and Arab worlds. Our multifaceted and comprehensive program has involved all members of the section, and several other Mission elements. Progress so far has been significant, and further enhancements are in the pipeline. End summary.

Background

¶12. Some 40,000 Egyptians come to the Embassy each year to receive services from the Consular Section. On average, each spends about two hours in our facility. Their experience at the Embassy, particularly in how they are treated, can fundamentally influence their perception of Americans. This strategy considers these people as a public diplomacy target, with a goal of influencing their views of the United States while they are in our building.

¶13. The Consular Section proposed a partnership between the Consular and Public Diplomacy Sections with cooperation from Management and the Regional Security Office in the beginning of CY 2005. As a result, outreach to consular clients is now part of the public diplomacy goal of the Mission Performance Plan. In addition, we are working closely with RSO, MGT, and facilities to ensure that our initiatives are implemented promptly.

Progress so far

¶14. To date, the Consular Section has already implemented a number of measures to improve the comfort and impression received by our clients. We have established a food kiosk in the visa waiting room, enhanced the cleanliness of the area, replaced the seating, added lighting to the previous dark interior, painted the walls and replaced ceiling tiles. We have developed a customer survey that will be administered during a two-week period. In addition, IV applicants can now make appointments to personally come to the Embassy to inquire about the status of their cases. Most importantly, we have dramatically reduced waiting periods for interviews, reduced processing time, and have provided more opportunities for clients to inquire about their visa cases.

¶15. This initiative was launched during our 2005 Consular Leadership Day (CLD) (reftel) and refined during the section's retreat in September. Under the overall coordination of ELO Lisa Swinarski, the entire section has been mobilized. Five workgroups were created and each drafted an implementation plan. The groups are: Lobby Beautification and Signage, NIV Materials, IV Materials, Consular Outreach, and Customer Service. During the most recent CLD the section took stock of its progress and set goals to achieve before the summer rush season. Also, each unit (NIV, IV, FPU, and ACS) analyzed and made suggestions to improve its section of Cairo's consular website.

The future

¶16. By June 2006, we expect to install a waiting-room audiovisual system that will display information about visa processing, anti-fraud messages, and public diplomacy content. We have ordered 45 signs that will make the entire process much clearer for applicants. In addition, we will display better artwork and improve the PD information stand that has included "Hi" Magazine and other public diplomacy materials about the United States. We have enhanced, re-designed, and translated several handouts including our 221g, SAO,

and fingerprint forms. The dull and cold 214b refusal sheet has been transformed into a color booklet with friendlier and clearer language and extensive information explaining the refusal and the applicants' rights and options. (The 214(b) brochure is in final stages of production.) We have also developed new handouts for Diversity Visa applicants that we hope will reduce the number of refusals. Another goal for the first quarter of 2006 is to translate more of our consular website into Arabic and to hire two more greeters (using SRS funds) to welcome and provide information to the applicants at the guard post and in the visa waiting room.

17. Another goal is to reduce the amount of time an applicant must spend at the Embassy. We also look forward to more press outreach in cooperation with the Public Diplomacy Section. In the last 12 months there have been ten press encounters as the section attempts to overcome deep-seated misunderstandings about the welcome they will receive in the U.S. Embassy. Last fall we held a press briefing on the new Diversity Visa Program that resulted in articles in three major publications. More recently, the CG conducted an interview with the American Chamber of Commerce's Business Monthly magazine to spread our message about business travelers. Also, we plan to expand outreach to students, the business community, American citizens and other groups such as Diversity Visa applicants and community groups.

18. In order to improve our interaction with customers, we are contracting an outside instructor to provide customer service training to consular officers, consular FSN's, guards, and telephone operators. Finally, we are planning to establish an information and communication unit to better respond to our customers' inquiries.

Comment

19. While we have major PD Initiative goals to reach by June 2006, we expect the initiative to continue indefinitely with new ideas and better ways to enhance our services. As always, it is a challenge to balance our increasing workload with special projects. It has only been through a commitment by MGT, PD, RSO and other sections of the Embassy that we have been able to be successful. While it is hard to measure the results of the initiative, every Egyptian who is positively impacted by it is a success.

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